mists, and powdered formulations are often unable to reach many of the vessels most vulnerable components. To achieve complete treatment, we have recently incorporated high volume water-based foam generators into our treatment arsenal. These machines permit us to direct preservative rich foam into hull cavities, coating surfaces completely and providing the protection they require.

The use of foam machines permits effective borate application throughout the vessels while creating only minimal inconvenience. Our initial large scale treatment of the steam schooner *Wapama* in 1988-89 utilized a complex system of fixed pipes and spray nozzles which, although effective in the areas treated, was highly intrusive and limited public enjoyment of the vessel. Portions of the vessel, including those not reached by the spray, remain untreated.

Foamed borate has a number of distinct advantages over standard liquid treatments. Foam adheres well to the surfaces it contacts. It can fill voids entirely and may be pumped or poured into spaces where it often remains undisturbed for many days. This encourages high levels of initial absorption and in components with high moisture content can permit diffusion to begin immediately. Repeat application can provide sufficient boron for protection of even the largest timbers.

Commercial foaming equipment is available for use with borate products, and is very effective for residential-sized structures. Our requirements for large ships were far greater. We needed equipment that could generate several thousand gallons of foamed preservative quickly and efficiently. We investigated foam-generating equipment utilized by other industries and evaluated several designed for use by fire departments to quickly produce dense blankets of foam. These proved highly successful. The equipment we selected can produce 15,000 gallons of foam using 250 gallons of 15 percent borate solution in about 20 minutes. Pre-mixed borate solution is pumped to the foam generator where a foaming agent is injected and foam produced. We can quickly fill internal voids with thick, preservative rich foam that flows into every space.

In addition to foamed borate application we continue to utilize a 10-15 percent solution for application by spray, brush, roller or dipping. We also use low volume mists, fused boron rods, and powder applications. Much has been learned during the years since 1985, and our experience with boron treatments has proven to us that this preservative can provide an increased level of protection of the wooden vessels and artifacts in our care.

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Michael Laws

The Aiken-Rhett House

Historic Charleston Foundation Looks at its Past and Sees its Future

The docent began her tour by saying, "At Drayton Hall, they haven't added anything to the building. Here at the Aiken-Rhett House, we haven't taken anything away." And it's true. Throughout the Aiken-Rhett House, along with pealing paint and exposed plaster lathe, the visitor clearly sees the efforts to update and add comfort for the residents. For example, in the kitchen area, the oil lamp still hangs from the ceiling, the gas line runs next to it. The early 20th-century knob and tube wiring is stretched over the gas line, and the old gaslight is now electric. It is all still there, frozen in a time capsule that spans one-and-a-half centuries and countless lives.

When acquired by the Charleston Museum in 1975, the Aiken-Rhett House posed a unique problem. Other historic properties in Charleston, South Carolina were restored to a particular period and told a specific story. What era and historic depiction should be represented by this

1817 urban plantation, complete with dependencies, slave quarters, and even original privies? William Aiken, Jr. extensively renovated the house in the 1830s. His family lived there in opulent luxury. They entertained the highest members of society. Even the President of the Confederate States, Jefferson Davis, was their guest. Few properties could better depict the grandeur of the Antebellum South. Aiken was the largest slave holder in his state. The lives of African Americans, upon whose free labor the luxurious living of the owners was financed, can not be forgotten. After the war, the house, along with the city, fell into disrepair. Its significance was overlooked as Charleston slowly recovered a century later, and the house was never renovated. It remained a dusty mirror, reflecting the Reconstruction period. All are significant stories; however, the question was which should the Aiken-Rhett house tell. The answer was "all of them."

John Robinson, a cotton factor in Charleston, constructed the house on the outskirts of Charleston around 1817. Debts forced him to sell the house in 1826 to one of his creditors, William Aiken, Sr.. Aiken used it as rental property. A carriage accident took the life of Aiken in 1831, and his business and the house passed to his son, William, Jr.

William and his newly-wed wife, Harriet, began an extensive renovation of the house. The sandstone steps were removed and the main entrance was relocated to the side. The first floor was converted to twin drawing rooms. An addition was added to the east end, containing a dining room on the first floor, and a luxurious ballroom on the upper level. The brick exterior was stuccoed, changing the architecture from Federal to Greek Revival. The slave quarters, located above the detached kitchen, were enlarged, presumably to house the increased number of domestic servants needed to operate the urban plantation and entertain guests. The block-long rear lot also included a two-story stable with additional slave quarters in the upper level, a cow shed, chicken shed, and two privies. All were constructed of brick, and surrounded by a ten-foot high brick wall.

The Aiken-Rhett House. Photo courtesy the author.

Aiken was extremely successful in business. He inherited his father's mercantile business, but was a successful rice planter in his own right. He owned Jehossee Island, a 3,300-acre plantation. He was the largest slaveholder in South Carolina, and reportedly the wealthiest man in the state. He entered politics in 1838, serving as a legislator, then a senator in the state government. In 1844, he became governor of South Carolina. He was elected to the United States Congress in 1851, and served three terms. During this time, he and Harriet entertained the highest members of society in their home.

In 1857, he retired from the political world and, with his wife and their daughter, toured Europe. During their grand tour, which lasted for more than a year, they purchased several pieces of art. Arrangements were made with Aiken's cousin, Joseph Daniel Aiken, to supervise the construction of an art gallery addition to their house. The gallery was located off the main entrance.

With the coming of the Civil War, life would drastically change in Charleston. Aiken, although a unionist before the war, strongly supported the Confederacy. When Confederate President Jefferson Davis visited the city in 1863, he stayed at the Aiken's home. Aiken gave a lavish dinner party for the president, attended by Charleston's finest. Mary Boykin Chesnut recorded in her diary that "Mr. Aiken's perfect old Carolina style of living delighted Jefferson." Even though the war raged, it could not stop another joyous occasion that occurred at the home. Aiken's daughter, Henrietta, married a young Confederate officer, Captain A. B. Rhett and the celebration was one of the grandest ever hosted in the city.

Charleston suffered greatly during the war. Union gunboats shelled the city almost daily. In 1863, a fire destroyed a huge area of the downtown section. However, the Aiken house escaped

Docents escorting visitors through the house provide interpretation as well as insure preservation. Photo courtesy Historic Charleston Foundation.

the damage suffered by residences built closer in to the town. After the war, the pall of economic depression covered the city. The South was defeated, and Charleston was almost dead. Aiken spent the next two decades working to restore its prosperity, but it was not to come. William Aiken died in 1887. Harriet Aiken lived with her daughter and son-in-law until she died five years after her husband.

Just as the city withered in the post-war years, so did the house. Henrietta Aiken Rhett began to close off the parts that were not being used. No longer needed for lavish parties, the ballroom became a storage room. The glory that was such a part of the house before the war was forever gone. Over the years, the portion used for living space continued to decrease as funds dwindled. Improvements were made to the home's working systems; however, the old plumbing and wiring were not removed. The property passed to the Rhett's son. His widow, Frances Hinson Dill Rhett, donated the property to the Charleston Museum in 1975.

Work was begun to assess the immediate needs of the property. More than $1.2 million was spent to stabilize and protect the structure. In 1982, the house was finally opened for public visitation. The leaking roof, and the piazzas which had become unsafe, were replaced in the 1980s. Then in 1989, Hurricane Hugo struck a direct hit on Charleston. The chimneys of the Aiken-Rhett House toppled in the blow, trees were uprooted, the cow shed and one of the privies were demolished. Repairs were made to make the house weather tight again, and the two unrepairable outbuildings were replaced with replicas. However, the visitation fell off drastically. Charleston Museum closed the Aiken-Rhett House to daily visitation in 1993, and transferred ownership to Historic Charleston Foundation (HCF) two years later.

HCF continues the policy of preservation as much as possible, and uses interpretation in that effort. If the visitors know the history, the whole history, and understand its significance, they will appreciate the need to save what is left of the house. Therefore, docents endeavor to give the most complete picture possible. The extravagant lifestyle lived by the Aiken family was only possible because of slavery. Even though the life of the house servants was considerably better than that of a field slave, they were still enslaved. The slave quarters, just a few yards from the main house, are stark and cold. The visitors, who moments before were marveling at the beauty and splendor of Aiken's home, can be overwhelmed when they realize that bits of coral or light blue paint remaining on the walls in the slave's home were applied by the slaves who lived there one-and-a-half centuries before. These are all that remain of what would have been considered a luxury by the occupants.

"We are dedicated to preserving the house, rather than restoring it," says HCF's Executive Director, Carter Hudgins. Therefore, a three-pronged approach based upon preservation, restoration, and archeology has been developed. The goal, Hudgins explains, is to maintain the interior of the house and the dependencies in their current condition. However, in order to accomplish this, the exterior must be restored to be completely weather tight. "We have a completely different set of standards for exterior restoration as compared with interior preservation. We must maintain the exterior, or we will lose the interior."

With visitation numbers increasing yearly (20,598 in 1998), protection and carrying capacity are the critical issues. Hudgins looks to discover the "best future" for the Aiken-Rhett House. Regardless of what that "best future" of the Aiken-Rhett house is, the past, not just the glorious heritage of the Antebellum South, but the entire legacy, is preserved at the Aiken-Rhett House. Like the building itself, it may not be pretty, but it is authentic. The management and staff are dedicated to saving all of it, and telling the complete history.

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